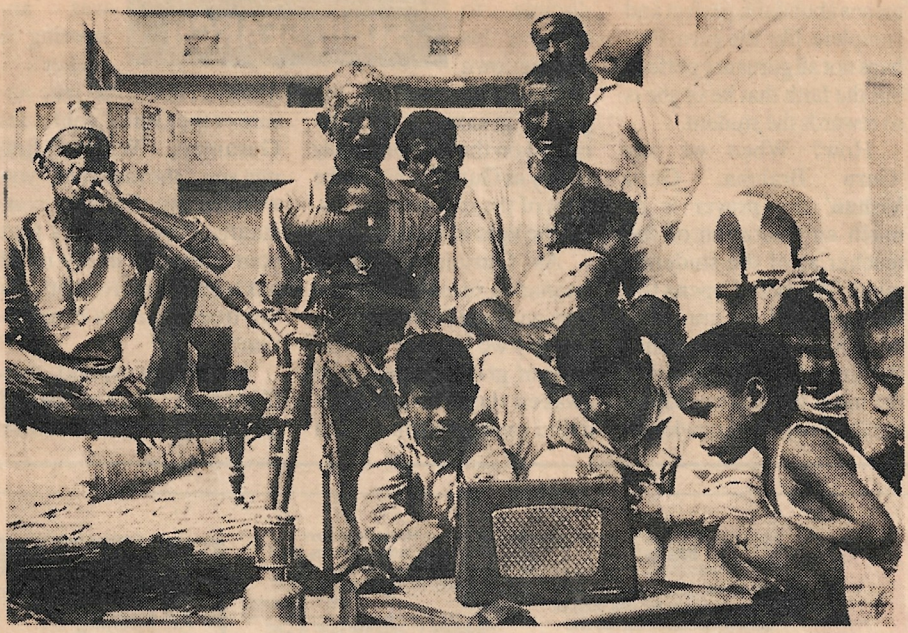
Rewind to era before space jam

On July 23, All India Radio celebrates its platinum jubilee. In a three-part series, *Newsline* goes back to where it all began and wonders where the radio station is headed in an era of fierce competition



VIDYA
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RAMDEV Tandel (65), a resident of Gorai, has trawled the high seas with his brothers and nephews for decades. But among the booty he has netted over the years is something that didn't surface from the sea. Tandel reminisces how, back in the early '50s, he had bought a small radio set. "The elders in my family had given me some money so that I could look after my bride. I went to the market and instead bought a radio that I had been eyeing for a long time. I don't have it now but it kept me company for many years when we used to go fishing," he says, smiling at the fond memory.

Of course, Tandel isn't glued to the radio now, which is why he doesn't know that his favourite radio station, which also heralded the advent of broadcasting in India, celebrates its platinum jubilee on Tuesday.

India kept its date with destiny on July 23, 1927, when a privately-owned transmitter was set up at Ballard Pier. The company had spent about Rs 4.5 lakh, a handsome sum then, to set up two radio stations in Bombay, before it replicated this feat a few months later in Calcutta.

Inaugurated as the Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC) by the then Viceroy of India, Lord Irwin, this simple instrument was the forerunner of what every Indian now knows as All India Radio (AIR). The station director then was L B Page, the first of 32 till date.

However, the company went into liquidation and the government took over the firm in 1930 under the label 'Indian State Broadcasting Service' (ISBS). It also took over some of the radio clubs and amateur broadcasting transmitters that had mushroomed by then. Being a nascent medium, the British administration was confronted with a unique problem: which government department should have jurisdiction over the service. There was no Ministry of Information and Broadcasting as we have today — this was created in 1941. So, from April 1, 1930, the Indian State Broadcasting Service initially functioned under Department of Industries and Labour on an experimental basis.

The now all-too-familiar "Good morning, this is All India Radio, the news read by..." first hit the airwaves in 1936, when the first news bulletin was broadcast. It was also when the 'ISBS' label made way for 'All India Radio'. Much later, in 1960, Lionel Fielden of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) wrote in his autobiography, *The Natural Bent*, how he had to persuade the viceroy of India to trade in the 'ISBS' label for one that was much more expansive. After much debate, the 'All India' Radio tag

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Know your radio

- The radio was theoretically discovered in the 1860s by James C Maxwell, a Scottish physicist, who worked out the formulae that predicted the existence of radio waves.
- The German physicist, Heinsich Hertz, projected rapid variations of electric current into space and proved Maxwell's theories right in the 1890s. We now use Hertz's name internationally to describe the number of cycles per second of radio frequencies
- Guglieluo Marconi, the inventor of the wireless telegraph, is credited with sending and receiving the first wireless signals in 1895
- The Americans were the first to use the word 'radio' in 1912, when the US Navy, believing that 'wireless' was too inclusive, adopted the term 'radiotelegraph'.
- In 1920, the first radio broadcasting in the world was done from Petersburg in the US
- The International Telecommunications Union, an organisation with more than 189 member-states today, decides on how to carve up the radio spectrum in the sky
- One of the earliest radio sets, the four-valve radio, cost Rs 500 in its Indian debut
- At the time, an annual licence fee of Rs 10 was made mandatory for every citizen who possessed a radio set, or receiving station, as it was then called. Few paid the tax; the government finally abolished the fee in 1985.

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was selected for the broadcasting company.

It was only in 1957 that 'Akashwani' was added to AIR's identity. It also happened to coincide with the introduction of Vividh Bharti, the entertainment channel that marked the beginning of AIR's love affair with film music. Till then, film music was considered a step-sister, something that only appealed to "people with poor taste". Hence, till then, only classical music was broadcast.

From the AIR archives comes another gem. AIR's signature music, which is played by all kendras and which is a must when transmission kicks off for the day, was composed by musician Zubin Mehta's father, Mehli Mehta, on the viola.

Here's more trivia soaked in nostalgia, and something that enthralled radio buffs in Mumbai on AIR's 60th anniversary. On the grand occasion, the radio station treated listeners to the voice of the now deceased classical singer Bal Gandharva, who was among the first artistes to go on air in India. During the broadcast, a member of that recording team was heard reminiscing: "This was no studio, but a mere hall where we did the recording. We hung many curtains to help us through the acoustics problem," he had said.

Some consider it old fashioned and archaic but for AIR, *shuddh* Hindi is sacrosanct. Which is why the radio station has stuck to the "*Ye Akashwani ki pradeshik prasaran sewa hai*," line that intersperses its Hindi programmes. No wonder, the line has become the butt of jokes. In the Hindi film *Chupke Chupke*, for instance, the protagonist, a professor of Biology, refers to his elder brother-in-law, who is a diehard *shuddh* Hindi buff, as, "*Ye jijaji hain ya All India Radio*?"

AIR obviously defends its choice of words, saying they are "setting standards" but others like Ameen Sayani, the baritone voice of *Geet Mala* fame sad, "AIR had blossomed using beautiful Hindustani (a mix of Hindi and Urdu), but somewhere after the 1950s, they began to stick to *shuddh* Hindi. This is one of the many reasons for its decline. Media is not about setting standards but communicating. You can communicate best when you use the language of the people."

But Sayani's reasoning may not find many takers in the 75-year-old radio station. Among AIR's self-imposed codes of conduct during its formative years, the radio station simply refused to broadcast the immensely popular Hindi film song *Dum Maro Dum* even three decades after it topped the charts. The reason: the song appears to promote the use of narcotic drugs.

Still, with its imposing standards, or perhaps because of them, AIR has grown from an institution with just six radio stations in 1947, to a network of 208 broadcasting centres today. AIR's home service today boasts of 24 languages and 146 dialects and its external service includes 26 languages, 16 national and 10 foreign. A daunting achievement despite competition from other mediums today.